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State official sells program

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Teens leave high school well educated about math, science and history, but many leave with little knowledge about how credit cards or even checkbooks work.

Beth Lindstrom, the state's director of consumer affairs and business regulation, wants to change that and has been spreading the word to high schools about the importance of what she calls "financial literacy," and providing them with materials to teach students those skills.

Unlike past generations that were taught to save money, Lindstrom said today most Americans live in debt.

"We put everything on credit because it is so easy to use, and it is easy to get, especially when they have tables set up at colleges to sign up," Lindstrom said.

"They go out and spend, and some people do not understand what it means to pay later."

Looking around at the high schools in Massachusetts, Lindstrom found that many do not offer a personal finance course.

"Massachusetts, historically, has not really done anything at the high school level about financial literacy," Lindstrom said. "A lot of teachers say, 'Thank God, it's about time,' when they hear about the program, because they see the real-life situation."

The state started the "Hi-Fi" program to provide high schools with materials created by the National Endowment for Financial Education to teach students about finance. The Office of Consumer Affairs has provided about 20,000 packets of information to more than 150 school districts, Lindstrom said.

Along with the packets, the Office of Consumer Affairs will provide a series of training sessions starting in November for teachers in Boston, Worcester, Hyannis, Springfield and Haverhill.

One of the teachers slated to attend one of the sessions is Natick High School finance teacher Bruce Harris. He teaches two classes on personal finance at NHS, and the students flock to it.

"It's very popular. We are trying to get another section because it is so popular," Harris said. "We like to get a lot of seniors in it - get the information to seniors who are leaving the building so they can take some life skills with them."

Some of the things students learn in Harris' class include balancing a checkbook, online banking, credit cards, how to read their paychecks, taxes and investing.

The students need the information

on financial literacy

more than ... they know, Harris has found.

"It's a funny class. Some of the kids think they know a lot more than they really know," Harris said. "Then, after they take it, they may say, 'Wow, I didn't know that.'"

More schools used to offer a personal finance class, Harris said, but when budget cuts were made, they often were cut. Harris knows from personal experience.

His first job was in Wayland, but he left after the department was eliminated. Harris also taught in Marlborough and Carver before coming to Natick, where he has taught for seven years.

Finding new materials to teach his classes can be challenging, Harris said. Instead he finds information and statistics in places like bank and insurance Web sites.

"We don't really have (training) in-house for business subjects, because they don't fall within the state mandates," Harris said. "This state is becoming aware we need to do something with this."

The workshops provided by the state have been useful, Harris said.

"Every other year I try to get out and see what is new," Harris said. "The state is amazing. The information changes every year and the state is good at keeping us updated."

Information about the teacher training sessions, which will be held next month and early December, and about getting the Hi-Fi materials is available by visiting the program Web site, www.mass.gov/hilfi, or by calling 617-973-8735.

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